

## **THE EMERGING PATTERN OF GEOPOLITICS**

**Peter W. Rodman**

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## FOREWORD

This Letort Paper is Mr. Peter Rodman's keynote address given at the XVIII Annual Strategy Conference of the U.S. Army War College. The theme of the conference was the global security challenges to the United States, and represented an effort to look beyond Iraq and Afghanistan and grasp contemporary global security dynamics. Without ignoring the two wars that are currently taking place in Iraq and Afghanistan, the Strategic Studies Institute (SSI) sought to reframe the debate over security within a global context.

Thus Mr. Rodman's address set contemporary security challenges to the United States within a framework of both an Islamist challenge rising from the Jihadi movement across the Muslim world that mostly finds its expression in terrorism, and in the dynamics of the rise and decline of great powers. In doing so, he set the tone for the subsequent presentations at the conference, many of which are being published by SSI.

This year's conference, like its predecessors, represents a major part of SSI's continuing activity to bring to our audience diverse views and insights into contemporary security challenges. It is in this spirit that we are pleased to present this address to our readers.

  
DOUGLAS C. LOVEFACE, JR.  
Director  
Strategic Studies Institute

## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH OF THE AUTHOR

PETER W. RODMAN is a Senior Fellow at the Brookings Institution where his interests cover a wide range of foreign policy and international security issues, including presidential policymaking in national security, multilateralism in global affairs, strategic options in the Gulf, the challenges of Islamist radicalism, and U.S.-China relations. His career began as an assistant to Henry Kissinger on the White House/National Security Council (NSC) staff, and he has worked in five presidential administrations, the Department of Defense, the Department of State, and the service at the White House included being a Deputy Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs from 1986 to 1987. From 1984 to 1986, he served as Director of the Policy Planning Staff at the State Department. Most recently, as Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs, Mr. Rodman was a senior adviser to the Secretary of Defense on the formulation and coordination of security strategy and policy with respect to most regions of the world, including Asia, the Middle East and Europe. During the Nixon and Ford administrations, he was a member of the NSC Staff and special assistant to Henry Kissinger. Before joining the Bush administration in 2001, he was a senior editor of *National Review*, Director of National Security Studies at the Nixon Center, and a member of the board of Freedom House and of the World Affairs Council of Washington, DC. He is the author of a history of the Cold War in the Third World (*More Precious than Peace*, Scribner's, 1994) and of numerous monographs and articles in scholarly journals, magazines, and newspapers. Mr. Rodman has an A.B. from Harvard, a B.A. and Masters from Oxford, and a J.D. from Harvard Law School.

## THE EMERGING PATTERN OF GEOPOLITICS

The theme of this conference is especially important. Iraq and Afghanistan, important as they are, do not exhaust the strategic landscape. There is a global strategic environment, which presents many challenges in many different regions of the world that bear close attention in their own right. In fact, that global environment forms the context in which we should be thinking about Iraq and Afghanistan. One of the reasons it is so important how well we do in Iraq and Afghanistan is its impact on American credibility – a precious commodity that will affect our success in these other theaters.

I have chosen for my topic the phrase “The Emerging Pattern of Geopolitics” because I do see a pattern emerging. For a long time, it was not clear what to call the post-Cold War world. I still do not have a name for it, but we can see already, in my view, two dominant features of the world we are in:

- One is what we call the Global War on Terrorism, but it is really an assault against the West by Islamist extremism, which is a virulent political ideology feeding on centuries of historical and cultural resentments. I would also argue that this ideological challenge is taking on a new geopolitical form, as Iran attempts to make itself the leader of it.
- The second challenge lies in the traditional dimension of relations among the major powers. I see the reemergence of Russia as one important feature of the current scene, but over the longer term the emergence of China represents probably a more dramatic change in the strategic landscape. It is the classical problem of a new great power appearing on world stage, raising

some complicated challenges of adjustment, for us and for them.

### **War on Terror/Islamist Extremism.**

First, let me talk about what we call the “war on terrorism.” John Abizaid calls it the “Long War,” and I think he is right about that. It will be with us for a while.

We say “war on terrorism,” but the heart of the problem is not terrorism as such — terror is a weapon — but an ideologically-driven assault not only against the United States, but against the West. It is important always to say that this is not “about Islam” or “against Islam.” What has come after us is not Islam but a warped political ideology which invokes some aberrant strains of Islam. The word “Islamism,” indeed, was coined by scholars to distinguish the political phenomenon from the religious faith.

In the modern period, this Islamist radicalism has been with us since the Iranian Revolution of 1979. There was fear at that time that this virulent ideology would spread around the Middle East. It did not spread, at first — among other things, Arabs do not trust Persians — but it did begin to spread at the beginning of the 1990s. I think there were two reasons why it did:

- The collapse of the Soviet Union led to a certain discrediting and demoralization of the Marxist-Leninist Left worldwide. The collapse of the radical Left in much of the Third World contributed to a wave of democratization in those countries: In Latin America, in some countries in Africa, and elsewhere, the absence of a radical challenge to the established order permitted a kind of “normal” politics to develop. The tragedy of the Middle East is that the weakening of the secular,

“socialist” Arab radicalism left a vacuum that was filled by a radicalism from a different direction, Islamism. (I have a Palestinian friend who told me about a friend he had: The guy was a Marxist agitator on the West Bank. Many years later, my friend ran into him again, and he was wearing the beard and the robes of an Islamist agitator.)

- The second new factor was the Afghan war against the Soviets: The Sunni Islamist radicals think they brought down the Soviet Union by themselves—and they now think they can replicate the achievement against the second superpower.

So, in this sense, the spread of this radicalism in the Sunni world is a phenomenon of the end of the Cold War.

Thus, we see the rise of Islamism in Algeria and Egypt in the 1990s. I do not think it is an accident that these pressures rose against two countries whose revolutions had been in the name of the now discredited secular, “socialist,” ideology. Also in the 1990s we saw the rise of al-Qa’ida, and its attacks on our embassies in East Africa, on the *USS Cole*, and, of course, September 11, 2001.

Iraq is today a battleground in this struggle but is hardly the cause of it. This ideology, as I said, is fueled by centuries of resentments—by the conviction that the West is corrupt, evil, and doomed like the Soviet Union. And of course it is so fanatical that mass murder is acceptable to them as a means. I am sorry to say that there is a certain euphoria among these extremists in recent years: They think they are on a roll; they think they can win, that they can defeat the West. It is crazy, but they believe it.

The good news is that millions of people in the



Muslim world *agree* this is crazy. These people want to be part of the modern civilized world, not overthrow it. Speaking from my experience in the Pentagon, I can tell you that just about every government in the Muslim world, from North Africa to the Gulf to Central Asia to Southeast Asia, is a partner with us or wants to be, including in the defense field. The key to our strategy is supporting them, because they are on the front line.

I mentioned Iran, because in a sense we are coming full circle since 1979. Ahmadinejad sees Iran as the leader, the champion of all this. In his open letter to President George W. Bush in May 2006 and his open letter to the American people last November, it was interesting that he set himself up as Bush's counterpart, as Bush's equal, as the spokesman for all of Islam.

The good news is the Arabs do not want this either. In their eyes, reasonably enough, Iran's nuclear ambitions and its conventional military buildup point to a bid for regional hegemony. Sunni Arab governments are, if anything, drawing closer to us now. They saw the Hezbollah crisis in Lebanon last summer as an Iranian power play.

The United States has responded to this Arab concern by a variety of means. I was part of a joint State-Defense diplomatic initiative that we called the Gulf Security Dialogue, which was about intensified cooperation in such areas as air and missile defense, counterterrorism, counterproliferation, and so forth. The United States also sent a second carrier strike group into the Gulf to strengthen deterrence and reassurance. These countries have other options. They could try to go nuclear themselves (which they are flirting with); alternatively they could revert to appeasement of Iran. The preferable option is that they have confidence in us as their ally and protector.

What are the long-run prospects? From the Soviet experience, we know that militant ideologies can be discredited by failure. And I would say that the rich diversity in the Muslim world is a barrier to Iran's ambitions and to al-Qa'ida's ambitions. It is not just Sunni vs. Shia, or Arabs vs. Persians. Read some of Zawahiri's tirades against nationalism and national identity. He complains of "hateful nationalism" as a parochialism that diverts from the duty of global jihad; he denounces the Iraqi people and the Palestinian people for being seduced by elections and democracy, which, again, lead them away from the transnational cause he is espousing. He has repeatedly denounced even Hamas for participating at all in the political process.<sup>1</sup> So there are barriers to this transnational ideology. The moderates are showing courage, but they need our support.

### **Relations among the Major Powers.**

Let me now shift back to the other dimension of today's global environment, relations among the major powers. This is the traditional dimension of international politics, and, while the Global War on Terror is an understandable preoccupation, the laws of geopolitics have not been repealed.

With Europe, I have to say that I think our relations are getting better. The current German Chancellor is far better disposed to the United States than her predecessor; the forthcoming election in France could produce a French President who is the best disposed to the United States of any President of the Fifth Republic. Look at the NATO engagement in Afghanistan, which is an extraordinary step in the history of the North Atlantic Alliance. On the other hand, there are long-

term demographic trends that will weaken Europe, with unpredictable results.

Next, Russia: I was in Munich in early February at the Wehrkunde Conference and heard President Vladimir Putin's famous speech. But if Putin's goal was to split Europe from the United States, I think it backfired badly with the Europeans. The anti-American stuff in his speech was stale; what struck the Europeans was his threat to pull out of the Intermediate Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty—which concerns them a lot—and his insulting the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and its election-monitoring as a “vulgar instrument of American domination.” The OSCE is headed by a Frenchman, who was not amused! All this was shocking to the Europeans. Meanwhile, Russia is squeezing Ukraine and Georgia, using energy as a weapon of pressure against everyone; it is also trying to push us out of Central Asia.

The bottom line is we have a Russia problem. But the Putin speech may have been a wake-up call in Europe. An attempt by Russia to undo the outcome of 1989 and 1991 cannot be accepted. This has to be on the U.S. and European agendas, and we have to present a common front.

With respect to other important major powers—Japan and India—U.S. relations with them are literally better than ever. In the security field, Japan has never been as committed and as close to us as it is now. And I was happy to have been part of the growth of the U.S. defense partnership with India, which is a significant new strategic development.

Now, China: It was my office that published the annual reports to Congress on China's military power. These were, we hoped, factual and descriptive, not

beating any drum. But they were sobering: China has achieved a first-world military capability in some areas (modern mobile intercontinental ballistic missiles [ICBMs]; modern submarines; jet fighters; antiship weapons they are purchasing from the Russians). We have taken note of the lack of transparency in their defense programs—we believe their real spending is two to three times what they announce. And the defense budget they announced has been growing annually at 17-18 percent in recent years. This represents a patient, systematic, long-term commitment to build up what they call their Comprehensive National Strength.

We also see signs of a global foreign policy—a more active diplomacy in Latin America, Africa, and elsewhere. This may be a natural thing and a tribute to China's ability and economic success. But, nonetheless, China's rise is a potentially transforming event in the international landscape.

China, in my view, should be seen not as a military problem but as a geopolitical problem. In the military dimension, we should be able to maintain a deterrent balance in the Taiwan Strait and head off any miscalculation. We and our allies can shape the strategic environment in the Asia/Pacific region into which China is emerging and to which China will need to adapt. And there are other dimensions of U.S. policy—economic, diplomatic—which can help shape China's evolution in constructive directions. Nothing is foreordained. It is certainly within our means to manage overall relations with China and with Russia in a reasonable way.

### **Conclusions and Implications.**

Now, I have discussed the Islamist challenge

and relations among the major powers as separate dimensions of policy. But one might reasonably ask: In what ways do they – or might they – interact?

For one thing, the United States, Europe, Russia, and China all face similar challenges from Islamist extremism. If these challenges grow, they may loom larger in all these countries' relations with each other.

For example, I read an interesting piece on a radical Islamist website denouncing China for its ties with Israel and for its alleged repression of Chinese Muslims.<sup>2</sup> The piece also speculated that, after al-Qa'ida brings down the United States, China will replace the United States as al-Qa'ida's main rival for world domination. So, there are all sorts of possibilities!

A second point that has occurred to me: Everything I have discussed highlights the renewed importance of energy as a strategic factor in international politics, and as a weapon. I do not have the solution, but I can visualize a tremendous strategic payoff if we can reduce the world's dependence on energy from unreliable suppliers.

A third point: In the nearer term, the clear implication of what I have discussed only points to the absolutely critical role that the United States plays as the bulwark of international order.

- In the Middle East, all our friends, Arabs and Israelis, tell us this: "Do not abandon us." They all see Iraq in this context. They worry about Iran, and we are trying to reassure them we can shield them against Iran. But they see Iraq as a test of our credibility: "Do not abandon us."

- In Asia, it is not an accident that our relations are growing tighter with many countries such as Japan, India, Australia, Vietnam, Indonesia, Singapore, Mongolia, to name a few. They, too, count on American

staying power to maintain the equilibrium of Asia.

In fact, to be blunt about it, as we look around the world and look at the potential sources of instability, potentially one of the most destabilizing factors in the world today is the fear of American weakness. So much depends on us. The fear that we might be abandoning significant commitments or that we may be turning inward could seriously erode global confidence in the face of these challenges. This is something all Americans need to bear in mind, as we conduct our national debate.

As I said at the beginning, the premise of this conference is correct: We cannot neglect the global and regional context. The world's challenges are interconnected in an important sense: It will not be so easy for us, if we let ourselves be weak in one part of the world, to appear strong everywhere else. Credibility, once lost, has to be re-earned the hard way. The United States has the skill and resources to do what is necessary, I have no doubt. What we also need is the will.

## ENDNOTES

1. For example, Zawahiri video messages of January 22, 2007, [siteinstitute.org/bin/articles.cgi?ID=publications246007&Category=publications&Subcategory=0](http://siteinstitute.org/bin/articles.cgi?ID=publications246007&Category=publications&Subcategory=0); and Zawahiri video of March 4, 2006, [www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/custom/2006/04/24/CI2006042400583.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/custom/2006/04/24/CI2006042400583.html).

2. "China Under the Microscope of the Salafi Jihadist," Al-omh.net, January 13, 2007, and January 23, 2007, [www.al-omh.net/vb.showthread.php?t=11437](http://www.al-omh.net/vb.showthread.php?t=11437).